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Opinion • Commentary

An Outraged Congress Sets Its Sights on Contra Aid

Washington.

HOPEFULLY, the Iranian-arms scandal will force the administration to abandon its policy of aiding the Nicaraguan contras. "Hopefully" because it is and always has been a badly flawed policy which neither addresses legitimate

By Wayne S. Smith

U.S. security concerns nor helps the Nicaraguan people.

The administration hasn't even gotten its story straight as to what it is supposed to accomplish. At first the president said the purpose was to interdict arms going from Nicaragua to guerrillas in El Salvador. But after some five years of operations, the contras have yet to interdict a single rifle or a single bullet.

At other times, the president has insisted the purpose was to pressure the Sandinistas to negotiate. But for some time now it has clearly been we, not the Nicaraguans, who did not wish to negotiate.

When in July of last year the Contadora foreign ministers called on the United States and Nicaragua to resume bilateral talks, the Nicaraguans accepted, the president flatly refused. And given that Assistant Secretary of State Elliott Abrams has all along insisted that the very idea of a negotiated agreement with the Sandinistas is "preposterous," how can the administration argue that aid to the contras is intended to produce just such an agreement? No, that is too illogical even for this administration.

There must be another purpose, and indeed there is. In more candid moments, the administration acknowledges that its real objective is not to deal with or restrain the Sandinistas, but to get rid of them, as Ambassador Philip Habib, the president's special negotiator for Central America, informed a recent public gathering at the National War College, "our policy is governed by the central determination that a Sandinista government is unacceptable."

Ironically, however, getting rid of that government is an objective which is also beyond the reach of the contras. As a military force they are and always will be inferior to the Sandinista army, and given their aura as a CIA-organized force led by ex-Somoza military officers, they have no chance of gaining popular support inside Nicaragua and hence cannot win.

This failure to define attainable goals is lamentable, and dangerous, for the United States does have legitimate security concerns in Nicaragua. We don't want Soviet or Cuban bases there, for example, or the introduction of weaponry which might threaten the United States, nearby sealanes, neighboring countries, or the Panama Canal. And we want all Soviet and Cuban military personnel to go home. But aid to the contras addresses none of those problems. If anything, it has made them worse. There are more bloc military personnel in Nicaragua today than before we started the contra war.

Nor has our present policy in any way helped to preserve political pluralism, or otherwise to improve the lot of the Nicaraguan people. Rather, the contra war has resulted in a harsher crackdown inside Nicaragua. It has made life more difficult for the Nicaraguan people and has diminished, not enhanced, the prospects for pluralism.

Though it is a policy which achieves nothing — which can achieve nothing — the administration has seemed determined to pursue it to its calamitous end — one in which the president either let things drift on inconclusively as they are, with our security needs left twisting in the wind, or decided that since the contras couldn't win for us, we would go in unilaterally with our own troops, with all the costs in blood, treasure, world opprobrium, and divisions at home that would entail.

Revelations concerning the transfer of funds from the Iranian arms sales may change all that. Outraged over the way in which the will of Congress was simply ignored, many congressmen are already demanding an end to contra aid and a new look at our approach to the problem.

The new Congress can help point the administration toward a more appropriate policy by insisting that it stop its efforts to torpedo a Contradora agreement. The administration has so far blocked agreement by saying it would continue aid to the contras even after signature of a treaty, knowing full well that the Sandinistas cannot agree to the resulting limitation on their military capabilities so long as the United States is vowing to press on with the war anyway.

The Congress can neutralize this obstructionist tactic by legislating that once a treaty is in place, there will be no more funds to aid the contras, to maintain our own troops in Honduras, or to continue related military operations in the area, except in connection with enforcement of the agreement.

There are those who will say that United States security concerns are too important to be left to negotiation or enforcement by third parties. That is a valid point. Thus, as a corollary to the Contradora process, the United States ought to enter into direct negotiations with Nicaragua for a treaty itself, or a separate bilateral agreement, in which Nicaragua prohibited 1) the establishment of foreign bases, 2) the introduction of specified weaponry, and 3) the provision of arms to guerrillas in other countries. The United States, in turn, would agree to respect Nicaragua's sovereignty so long as the latter lived up to the commitments thus undertaken, while stipulating that if Nicaragua violated them, the United States itself would take whatever measures might be necessary to rectify the situation.

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Legislators who visit Managua could play a crucial role in this by emphasizing that while the American people have all along had qualms about illegal efforts to overthrow another government, they would have none about legal measures, even including use of force, to assure their own security and that of Nicaragua's neighbors.

Could Managua — could Moscow and Havana — be restrained by such agreements? Yes. The 1962 Kennedy-Khrushchev Understanding has worked. Twenty-five years after the missile crisis, no Soviet submarines operate from Cuban bases, no bombers from Cuban airfields. There are no missiles or nuclear weapons of any kind in Cuba.

A similar but broader agreement could be even more effective in the Nicaraguan case — broader and more effective in that it could include more precise means of verification, and a no-export-of-revolution provision, which the 1962 understanding did not.

Such an approach would give us the sort of security guarantees we need and would do more to preserve pluralism in Nicaragua than does our present policy. It would be an honorable and legal approach (as present policy is not), and could thus have the support of the American people and of international public opinion. If such a policy is adopted, some good will have come of the Iranian-arms scandal.

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